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ABSTRACT

Since the most immediate and efficient method of illustrating lectures on the history of the theatre is by using visual aids, theatre historians should learn the best ways of creating and using such aids as slides, slide/tape packages, commercially produced films and filmstrips, and video cassettes and tapes. These aids have characteristics which make them appropriate for different facets of a theatre program, especially in classroom instruction. However, some of them may also be used successfully in reporting research results, particularly those of performance reconstructions. Theatre historians must give more attention to reconstruction through actual performance and to recording those reconstructions for the benefit of other historians. Thus, graduate theatre programs should include basic photography and videotaping techniques. (JM)

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The Teaching and Reporting of Theatre History: Technological Advances and Possibilities

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read at the 1975 convention of The American Theatre Association

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The 1975 Ohio State University Theatre History Symposium took as its subject "The Teaching of Theatre History: Technological Advances and Possibilities." We are all familiar, to the point of nausea, with the stereotyped image of theatre history instruction: the professor, notes in hand, stands positioned behind a lectern in a darkened classroom while hundreds of slides flash past, the tedium relieved only by the clicking of the projector and the occasional snores of students. Professor Distler amusing described the stereotype in these terms at the 1972 SCA convention, and it remains a distressingly true cliché.

The stereotype is true because of a basic factor in theatre history instruction too often blithely assumed without question: as a performance art, theatre's history is most immediately and efficiently captured through pictorial means rather than through the written word (or the spoken word in the illustration-less lecture). I cannot transport my students in Columbus, Ohio, to ancient Greece, but I can show them pictures of ancient theatres, vase paintings and so on to provide at least an outline of the theatrical event so totally foreign to their own sensibilities. The historians of the various arts are surprisingly alone in this reliance upon the pictorial: at Ohio State, the Department of Classics received several major grants a few years ago to permit the incorporation of slides in their Classical Mythology course, which now serves as a model for such courses in that field, and the newsletter of the American Association of Ancient Historians recently recounted the astounding discovery (at the University of Washington) that slides of the Acropolis were effective for instructing undergraduates in the history of fifth century B.C. Greece.

A slide lecture can be boring, of course, and in all probability is more often boring than not. But so are all lectures, and most classes, particularly at the level of the freshman or sophomore survey course. And until the golden day when each college or university has a company of professionally skilled performers ready to present scenes from all eras of the past, pictorial material will probably remain a major tool of the theatre historian. Slides remain the most flexible and inexpensive visual aid available for classroom use.

Given the nature of the business, I find it astonishing that little or no effort is made to provide theatre historians with any sort of competency in creating and employing visual aids. The symposium at Ohio State was an attempt to call the attention of theatre historians both to methods of improving their use of visual aids, and to exploring newer (and hideously more expensive) technological tools now readily available. The areas examined, in order of ease and inexpensiveness, were:

1. slide taking and using
2. slide/tape packages
3. commercially produced films and filmstrips
4. videocassettes and tapes

Kathryn Payson Ripley, of the University of Southern California, provided us with a short (and, of course, illustrated) demonstration of slide-taking techniques, reminding us of such matters as picture-framing, combination of visual and textual images, and the ready availability of inexpensive copy stands which reduce poorly taken slides to a minimum. Charles Ritter, of Ohio State, demonstrated Ms. Ripley's point with slides of early twentieth century American actors, shown in conjunction with recordings of their most famous roles. Both the taking and employment of slides are obvious areas for the theatre historian, but are not covered fully in any graduate theatre program of which I'm aware; Ohio State's

Seminar in Iconography--during which each student selects pictures to be copied, resulting in a core slide collection of some four hundred slides --is the sole course which, to my knowledge, deals with such matters. But unless the theatre historian is blessed with a large budget to purchase the outrageously expensive slides available commercially, one must either make one's own, or do without. That many theatre historians could use some technical assistance will be manifest to anyone who's sat through illustrated lectures with any regularity. I once described the stage careers of James J. Corbett and John L. Sullivan to a convention of sports historians. My slides--all forty-five of them--were predominantly grey. The ballroom in which I spoke had no dimmers on its chandeliers. The one slide clearly visible (a colorful poster from the Library of Congress) was well received; the rest were superfluous. I had fallen victim to the very common trap of theatre historians: use lots of slides, even if they're not very good or are peripheral to the subject. Professors Ripley and Ritter both sternly warned us against these errors.

Perhaps the most potentially boring of illustrated lectures is the background one, providing essential information which must be presented. An example might be the architecture of the Hellenistic theatre: no matter how beautiful one's slides of Epidaurus happen to be (which of course helps; part of theatre history's appeal at Ohio State is that of a travelogue), a certain amount of tedium intrudes with theatre groundplans and the careful identification of the parodoi, orchestra, proskenion, traces of paraskenia, diazoma, thymele, and all the rest. Relatively new machines on the market offer a solution, which was explained by John Davis of the OSU Department of Classics: the slide/tape lecture. It's now possible to make a tape which is electronically keyed to a Carousel projector, and which

automatically advances slides as the tape plays, or is wound forward or backward. The tape--either on reel or cassette--can then be placed in the library and assigned as one would assign any text.

The advantage of the slide/tape lecture is great: it's relatively inexpensive to do on a small scale, it can be rapidly altered as the instructor's perspective changes, and most importantly, it permits the transmittal of vital information treated precisely as the individual teacher wishes it to be treated in a format allowing the student to replay, stop for note-taking, and so forth.

The pitfalls of the slide/tape lecture are also great. It is not simple to do until one has mastered the equipment, and it requires much more preparation than the standard lecture. Again, the visuals employed must be excellent, and must be chosen with extreme care. Perhaps the measure might be Professor Davis's experience: to create twelve slide/tape packages on various aspects of Classical Mythology, he devoted a full year to prepatory work and testing materials, and another full year to the actual production of the modules.

As readers of the Educational Theatre Journal know, a vast number of commercially produced films, filmstrips, audiotapes and videotapes are readily available; some are superb, others incompetently poor. One quite good film was shown to the Ohio State meeting: the Oedipus Tyrannus produced by Films for the Humanities and shown by the company's president, Harold Mantell. The film is excellent: the performances are visually interesting and vocally sound, and the shooting was done at the ancient theatre of Amphairion. Good as it is, the film provides an excellent example of the problems of the commercial product, which inevitably incorporates compromises in areas of scholarly debate. For the actors wear

only approximations of ancient costume, the masks are wholly unlike those catalogued by Webster and Trendhall, and the actors move through and around the piers of the proskenion which--regardless of which theory one accepts for the Hellenistic actors' performance area--is entirely inaccurate. Even more problematic, of course, is the theatre itself: Amphairion is a Hellenistic site generally dated at least a century after the initial performance of Oedipus. The film therefore offers nothing approaching the original fifth century audience's experience of the Sophoclean play.

All that might be unimportant in some contexts. The film does in fact provide a reading of the ancient play in a style which makes the play accessible while simultaneously stressing its differences from modern performance conventions. I would not hesitate to employ the film for an introduction to theatre class. I would not, however, show it to a theatre history class, however basic the course: the film's powerful impact would, I fear, hopelessly confuse the differences between Classic and Hellenistic theatre.

Videocassettes were demonstrated at last May's meeting by Professor L.B. Rabby of Ohio Wesleyan, who showed a recording of the Mabou Mines experimental group, and Professor Angelika Gerbes of Ohio State, who shared a working tape of reconstructed sixteenth-century Italian dances created as part of the projected Encyclopedia of World Dance. Videocassette equipment is expensive. It is, however, extremely easy to use, once the basic technical knowledge has been acquired, and individual cassettes are relatively inexpensive (an hour-long black-and-white cartridge now costs around $30.00). With videotape, one can record important or unusual performances, and--of most interest to the theatre historian--create a permanent record of reconstructions. Two years ago, for example, I staged the twelfth-century liturgical piece, The Play of Herod in conjunction with the music history

department. The performance was recorded on videotape. Since I'm not about to replicate that production or the six months of rehearsals for it or arrange for the chorus of a dozen twelve-year-old boy singers for King Herod to slaughter, the tape is invaluable: I can show a sample of liturgical drama to classes, who gain at least an inkling of the medieval form. Similarly, it takes a good deal of preparation to reconstruct a canary, spagnoletta, or verçeppe. The dancers trained by Professor Gerbes were very effective in live performance, but had they not been taped, her reconstructions would now exist only in the Labanotation scores.

In discursively reporting the areas discussed at Ohio State's symposium, I have wandered somewhat afield of this panel's topic. There is, I believe, a very real and perhaps obvious connection. Although most of the techniques and equipment analyzed at our meeting were intended to be directly related to classroom instruction, they can also be employed for that most important part of theatre history scholarship: the reporting of research results. Articles and books, the printed word on the page, are the major method by which theatre historians convey the results of their work to each other, with convention and conference presentations running a somewhat distant second. Most graduate programs in theatre, according to the survey recently undertaken for NAST by Professor Mitchell, insist on the traditional thesis or dissertation for the M.A./Ph.D. candidate, while term or seminar papers constitute a major portion of the graduate student's work, so much so that I sometimes suspect the MLA Style Sheet is more widely and carefully read than any theatre history book. Graduate students in theatre, in short, are being trained to produce written scholarship.

Published scholarship is invaluable, and I do not mean to convey

the impression that I believe it should be dismissed or that graduate students should not be expected to possess at least a minimal knowledge of English, even though increasing numbers of students on both undergraduate and graduate levels seem to regard that expectation as entirely unreasonable and arbitrary. The traditional skills of scholarly writing and publication remain vital to the theatre historian, and rightfully retain their centrality in the training of all theatre scholars.

Concurrent with training in the writing of research papers, however, I firmly believe that theatre historians should also be trained in the various media discussed at the Ohio State symposium. Media skills are useful for curricular development; they should also be exploited for the transmittal of research results, particularly those of performance reconstructions. Our colleagues in production have long maintained that the preparation of a play involves research work equivalent to that required for the writing of a competent article; their viewpoint is reflected in the ATA statement on tenure criteria. If, as I have argued elsewhere, the theatre historian is to be involved with production, the same amount of research is undertaken. My own production of Giraldi Cinthio's Orbecche, for example, involved several months for translation and background research, and eight weeks of rehearsal. After a week of performances, the production was gone. I have pictorial record in the form of slides, but the actual result of my efforts, the performance, is not available. Anyone who wished to know my conclusions about the performance viability of quasi-Senecan tragedy would be forced to rely upon my reporting.

It is hardly an original thought to maintain that theatrical performance, the primary source for all theatre scholarship, is ephemeral: reconstructions of various phenomena are, after all, what theatre historians

primarily do. I am suggesting, however, that theatre historians must give more attention to reconstruction through actual performance, and to recording those reconstructions so that the results of their research can be observed and assessed by other theatre historians. I can describe how I approached Orbecche and those interested can either accept or reject my approach, but the actual result of my work on that particular project cannot be evaluated since the artifact no longer exists.

Graduate students in theatre are already trained in production; again, Professor Mitchell's useful survey indicates that virtually all graduate theatre programs require some form of performance training or experience. And obviously, production is central to academic theatre departments. Very few of those productions are recorded in any form other than publicity photographs because few people graduating with advanced degrees in theatre are trained in any method of presenting research other than the written document, although if Professor Elwood's urgings toward the theatre history practicum are heeded the situation obviously will change. If theatre history can be viewed as being based on an historiography of enactment, as Professor Donohue suggests, surely it should include artifacts of reconstructed performances as well as descriptions and analyses. The equipment is readily available; the techniques are relatively uncomplicated. The results could be invaluable, as the New York Public Library Theatre Collection's project in videotaping selected professional productions is already demonstrating. What is lacking is the training. I would therefore suggest that graduate programs in theatre include basic photography work, and basic videotaping techniques. The equipment will be utilized only when theatre scholars are trained to use it, and develop new methods of reportage through continued use.